

TEN MINUTES

By A. H. SHIRRES

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As Philip Hone, a struggling young artist, followed a footman up Sir Arthur Brodham's staircase, he rapidly and somewhat nervously reviewed the short chain of circumstances which brought him here. He had been down in the country one day recently, and on his return was met by the amazing intelligence that Sir Arthur Brodham—the well-known art critic and patron—had called, and finding him absent had gone into his studio and spent some considerable time there. The day following brought a note of apology in terms somewhat vague from Sir Arthur, and what was a hundredfold more surprising, an invitation to dinner.

And here, as a dozen times before that evening, the young man's thoughts leaped into fairyland. Was it possible that his work showed signs of merit unmistakable enough to call forth recognition such as this? Was it possible that he was on the eve of becoming famous? But, no, no! With that vigorous control of the imagination only known to those who have trod early in the valley of disappointment, he thrust such hopes from him. Still, when the door opened he trembled.

Sir Arthur advanced and greeted the young man courteously.

"I fear I have come a little too early," he remarked, perhaps indistinctly, noting that they were the sole occupants of the great room.

Sir Arthur laughed lightly. "Say, rather, a little too late. There will be those here, as I mentioned in my note, whom you may find it advantageous to meet. But what I did not mention is that I took the liberty of asking you to be here at rather an earlier hour than anyone else. You are a little late, but we have still ten minutes, and, Mr. Hone, I have something I wish particularly to say to you."

The young man bowed in silence. There was something so chilling in his host's tone, now, that every pleasant fairy castle fell shivering to the ground.

"We have just, I believe, ten minutes," he pursued, calmly, "and, therefore, I had better get to work without delay. Against the wall of your studio there rests a large canvas on which the outlines of a picture have been traced. It represents the interior of a diligence, so far as one can judge, on the way through a wooded and perhaps snowy country. The general characteristics of the various passengers are roughly placed, but the face of one only clearly delineated. It is the face of the young lad in the corner; his eyes, you may remember, shine forth like stars from amidst the unfinished chaos of their surroundings. You have been heard to say, I understand, that this picture is born of a personal reminiscence. Well, may I ask you to tell me, as briefly as possible, what this personal experience is?"

Philip Hone started slightly at the mention of the picture, a rapid smile curving the lips which had begun to fall into what was perhaps a habitual expression of despondency. He listened, astonished, to Sir Arthur's request, which yet, in these novel circumstances, did not strike him with the force it would elsewhere.

"I can do so in a few words," he answered quietly. "As you may have presumed, I myself was a passenger in that diligence running betwixt two small towns in a densely wooded part of Normandy, the snow, as you correctly judged, weighing down the trees and lying deep on the ground. It was a tempestuous moonlight winter's evening. My seat was exactly opposite that of the figure which has attracted your attention in the picture, and whose original had occupied my instant—I am afraid not too polite—scrutiny all along the route. The lad was miserably attired, and held a worn-out violin to his shivering breast, but a more beautiful countenance I have never seen, and I have done but feeble justice to the great, solemn, lustrous dark eyes. The lips puzzled me, showing, as they did, glimpses of lovely youthful lines under a raven mustache in a most premature state of development. The moon, I remember, disappeared just before we reached the solitary little forest hotel of Saint Jacques, and we began to round the last hilly corner in total darkness. Suddenly a great glare of red light illuminated the snowy road, and starting up we sat blinking at the flames of a huge bonfire roaring and hissing in the courtyard of the inn. Just then, Sir Arthur, my glance fell on—the lad. But why should I relate this reminiscence of mine in so enigmistic a manner?" he ended with a laugh. "The fierce mustache had fallen off."

"Had fallen off?" echoed the other in the same undemonstrative tones, but with a slight touch of inquiry.

"Yes, into a small and particularly shaped brown band, which the next instant was clasped over the mouth. The little musician jumped out of the diligence and disappeared into the inn, but not before those lovely eyes had met mine with a glance defiant yet full of womanly pleading. The lad, of course, was no lad at all, but a strikingly beautiful young girl."

"And then?" inquired Sir Arthur quietly, with a little shudder, stretching his hand nearer the fire.

"And then?" repeated the young artist blankly, for the first time beginning to look somewhat embarrassed. "Well, then there was a ten minutes' stoppage at the inn."

"Of which you also availed yourself. And then?"

"Oh, yes, and then went on with the diligence. The little musician went no farther. She was going across country on the morrow to play at a fair." Mr. Hone's accents had grown more and more halting, but rather in uncertainty as to the purport of such a cross-examination than from any other feeling. Suddenly he resumed in a tone which had in it a good deal of spirit and a slight suspicion of ridicule: "As to our proceedings during that ten minutes' stoppage at the inn, I shall be happy to enlighten you; if, indeed (and heaven knows why), a trivial incident in the lives of two poor bohemians, down in their luck, arouses your interest. We related our mutual experiences of hard times. The girl was an American, and had fallen into her present state of destitution through a series of pitiful mishaps. I think the male attire had been donned for that occasion only—certainly I trust the mustache had; but as the matter was not so much as touched upon in our brief conversation, I hope you will excuse me if I am unable to offer a definite opinion on the point. Of course, we fell to boasting—like the two foolish children we were—of all the grand things we would do in our respective arts. She was bent on earning enough to study at a conservatorium. If there was a little talk more frivolous and foolish, I alone was to blame; I too (but pray pardon my mentioning such a thing) was solely responsible for the laughing, fraternal kiss with which our interview terminated."

A long picture-gallery opened into the drawing room. As Mr. Hone ceased speaking the distant rustle of a woman's dress became audible. Sir Arthur took a hurried step forward, and then, as the noise drifted leisurely away, paused and returned to his place by the fire.

"Mr. Hone," he said somewhat abruptly, "forgive my curiosity as to what you rightly call a trivial incident in the lives, as you say, of two poor bohemians. It was so—trivial, natural—even quite innocent. You will forgive me when I tell you that chance had made me acquainted with the tale of your picture, but vilely distorted and exaggerated. Well your picture, even in its present condition, is astonishingly clever and extremely capable in its management of technicalities. Under certain circumstances it would doubtless command a high price. However, some one told me you would be glad to get twenty pounds sterling for it. I offer you one hundred pounds, but on condition that you put it in the fire on your return home tonight."

"Sir Arthur!" gasped the young man. He gazed bewildered into the anxious face watching him. One hundred pounds—one hundred pounds. It rang in his ears, it quivered before his eyes. There was nothing very startling in the sum perhaps to Sir Arthur, but to poor Philip Hone it meant a mine of wealth.

"Agreed," he managed to say, wondering not at all yet about the condition of purchase, seeing only yet the yellow gold.

The other breathed a sigh of relief. "Good! Well, but that is not all. I have said something as to your talent. In the long run you might achieve success alone. But I know your circumstances, I am aware of the fallen fortunes of your house, and how you, poor lad, have striven to help. It might come, Philip, but prematurely gray hairs would pave its passage, and a seared and wearied heart perhaps be all that was left you when it did. And now think how differently you enter the lists with me for a friend and patron. You know very well that it is not too much to say I can give you fame—I can give you fortune—now. And this I am ready to do—but you must pass me your word that I hold the future monopoly of that reminiscence."

As the words left his lips the drawing room door opened and a tall, graceful young woman in a dress of soft white silk came into the room. Sir Arthur was already stooping in a careless attitude over the fire.

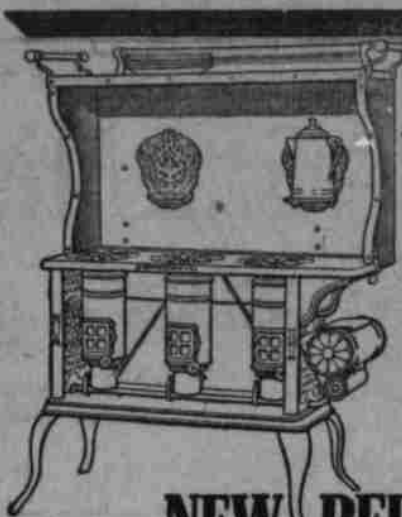
Philip Hone's brain was still whirling, but he swiftly realized that this must be the lovely Lady Brodham. Sir Arthur had recently returned from a prolonged stay abroad, and had brought with him a young wife whose beauty was already very famous. She advanced smiling, the light playing with the pearls at her throat, on the little crimson dagger near her heart, but for the moment leaving the face in shadow. And then she stepped into the broad path of bright firelight—and abruptly paused. Philip Hone, too, must have made an awkward step backward, for a little table laden with curious jangled and rocked at his hurried touch. Sir Arthur still continued idly toying with the little poker amidst the crackling, leaping flames.

It was only a long moment, yet the girl's face had grown very white, the eyes—flashing between the two men—extraordinarily piteous in expression. Crossing rapidly to her husband's side, she put her hand on his arm.

"Arthur, you have not introduced us," she said breathlessly, adding the next instant in tones so passionately agitated that one could well believe she spoke without realizing the words that came, "Is it—that I have come ten minutes too late?"

Sir Arthur put down the poker, the furrows on his brow once more seeming to deepen—to give him that air of premature age which had at first astonished Philip Hone. He slipped his hand quietly over hers and made the formal introduction.

"Yes, you have come late," he said, sadly, "but I am quite—quite pleased, dear, that you have come when you have." But there was deep meaning in his voice, and emotion in his dark eyes as it rested on her.



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